

The Linguistic Adventures of Leo and Neo

or

"Ugh"

Kenneth Hopkins

The problems forced upon civilization by the development of languages are numerous, baffling, and elusive of solution. These problems, furthermore, have never been comprehensively catalogued, and thus have escaped detection by the masses who labor on, under the resulting handicaps, oblivious of the fact that their every action is molded, inhibited, guided, and otherwise affected by language.

It may be logically assumed that, somewhere in the dawn of the neolithic period, man discovered the knack of regimenting oral noises in such a way as to convey meaning. Perhaps the fashionable man of the period, upon waking in the morning, said to his necessarily common law spouse, "Ugh," which, without straining the interpretation, might be construed to mean "good morning" in the modern sense. If this example of neolithic verbosity came to be repeated morning after morning it might, depending upon the number of social contacts of the man and his wife, develop into a tribal habit.

Following the same pattern, the man, whom we shall call Neo for the sake of brevity, probably said as his second utterance of each day, "Ugh ugh," which may have been the cue for Mrs. Neo to get out of the cave and whip up a dodo egg omelet and a pot of sassafras. Proceeding along this line of reasoning will, of course, bring one to the absurd picture of Neo, standing at day's end, pouring forth a resonant series of "ughs" in pursuance of his ninety-fourth comment of the day. This is, quite obviously, an overdevelopment of the true picture of the formation of language because Neo didn't have enough fingers and toes to count to ninety-four, and Westbrook Pegler, the only man who can say that many ughs consecutively, was not yet old enough to talk. Casting aside the ridiculous developments, one can arrive at a reasonably logical conception of the process.

Neo's problems, however, in coping with his ninety-fourth "ugh," cannot begin to compare with the struggle which must be put forth in the present civilization to gain even so much as a mediocre working knowledge of language. To portray this struggle, let us choose a hypothetical member of the present generation and examine chronologically his tribulations concerning his native tongue.

This person, whom, purely for the sake of rhyme, we shall call Leo, is subjected almost immediately following birth to

endless and incoherent babblings and cooings perpetrated by otherwise sane adults laboring under the fantasy that an infant is born with an understanding of baby talk. Usually Leo accepts this drivel with unconcerned nonchalance unless it is accompanied by a bottle of warm milk. His indifference to the language which permeates this period of his life probably is instrumental in saving him from developing into a blithering idiot in later years.

Although baby talk may haunt Leo through the first three or four years of his life, his next experience with language comes before he is a year old. He is bantered and cajoled into making attempts to pronounce words and names. He is offered bribes and rewards of sweets, balloons, rattles, and rubber dollies if he will only say "mama," "dada," "Auntie Samantha," "Uncle Oglethorpe," or other polysyllabic names. When, perhaps in a moment of weakness, Leo inadvertently lets slip a syllable or two which remotely resemble a word or name, family imaginations run riot, and he is descended upon with wild jubilation and gets no rest until he repeats or collapses into slumber. From this time on Leo is plied with requests to say "bye, bye" to departing relatives, to say "doggie" at the sight of a canine, and to say "nice Josephine" to his obnoxious cousin.

Leo's sand-pile-in-the-back-yard period of development brings forth further harassing experiences with language by contacts with the neighbor's children who, being perhaps two or three years older, cannot refrain from commenting upon Leo's astounding stupidity and small vocabulary. To them it isn't conceivable that anyone exists who doesn't know what "atum" means. "Why atum is the stuff they make bombs out of that Russia don't know how to! Gosh, don't you know what atum means?" So Leo decides that his mother made a mistake by letting the stork bring such a dumb kid into this brilliant world with all its academic brats who know the meaning of "atum."

Society, believing that the normal course of the lives of unschooled people failed to enslave them properly to the dictates of language and its grammar, invented the school. At first attendance was voluntary; then as its power and prestige increased, laws were formed to force attendance upon innocent children between stipulated ages. Leo, at the age of five years and to avoid the law, enters kindergarten. This institution with the German name is not concerned with acquainting young people with the arts of horticulture and truck farming as the name implies. Unsuspecting five-year-olds are entertained with crayons, water colors, and paper dolls while the adult instructors plot methods of injecting here and there the devious propaganda tools of language cultivation, such as the alphabet, picture reading books, and spelling contests. Here Leo learns

that the alphabet proceeds from A to Z through twenty-four other odd-looking characters which he had formerly seen on the sides of his wooden blocks. He is informed that these twenty-six letters are used in various combinations to make up all the words of the English language, a meaty revelation to any kid. He is told that intelligent young people like himself quickly learn to recite the alphabet backward as well as forward and always spell cat, c-a-t.

When Leo completes the one-year course in kindergarten he is matriculated into elementary school. Society does not disguise the fact that the elementary school was instigated for the purpose of fostering knowledge of the language; its popular name is grammar school. Leo is expected to maintain his sanity through eight years of classes in reading, spelling, grammar, literature, debate, speech, rhetoric, and other subjects bordering on linguistic gymnastics. Reading classes reach boredom through the tales of Sir Walter Raleigh, who was irrational enough to throw away a perfectly good coat, and a king named Arthur, who was bent upon battering people into morality by means of the lance and sword, plus countless other pointless word formations called stories. Leo is forced to endure spelling classes which involve "bees," another name for public embarrassment as a result of not being able to place the letters of a word like "parthenogenesis" in the proper order. His grammar classes warn of the catastrophe of the split infinitive, look with horror on the misplaced modifier, and give hints on how to most effectively sprinkle commas. His literature teachers are shocked when Leo confesses that he failed to perceive the subtle, hidden meanings in this or that craftily phrased poem. His speech teacher and debate coach are driven to distraction because he can't seem to learn to wiggle his left arm in conformity to the preponderance of the spoken word.

Completion of elementary school, aside from leaving Leo in a state of near mental collapse, brings about his entrance into high or preparatory school. The perennial battle between language and the human brain continues with an accelerated rehash of the grade school material rewritten in thicker books, more complex sentences, and longer words. Hours are devoted to the conveyance of allegedly priceless information concerning the importance of language to science and scientists, of language to mathematics and mathematicians, of language to history and historians, and of language to language and linguists. In high school Leo is coerced into intimate relationships with Latin, much to the further confusion of his mind which is already cluttered to the point of chaos with half-formed conceptions of the intricate viscera of English. He is blithely told that from the language of Virgil and the Caesars he will glean valuable assistance in his attempt at mastery of English. His gleanings, he

soon begins to see, consist of learning plurals ending in "ae" instead of "s," of learning that "v" in Latin is sounded as the "w." With these and limitless other aids to more complete comprehension, Leo, after four years, is graduated. At this point he is statistically qualified, by virtue of a delightfully embellished diploma complete with the names of the high school principal and superintendent, to become a day laborer. Perhaps, if he or his family have sufficient social connections, he might even be placed as a junior file clerk or an office boy.

Let us, at this point, demonstrate our economic power in hypothetical situations by endowing Leo's parents with a respectable middle-class fortune. After surveying the possibilities of Leo's lucrative employment, he and his father decide that perhaps it would be best if a part of the fortune were to be invested in higher education. If Leo and his father were to stop to figure the extent of his education at this point, it would be revealed that he has spent some 2,600 days, or roughly 18,200 hours of his young life in institutions of learning. Society, however, is not yet placated. The following autumn finds Leo, at the age of eighteen years, registering at the university. This, he thinks, is where he really begins to learn things. He believes he will no longer be plagued, as he was in the lower schools, with the constant struggle with languages. Here is the beginning of valuable, succulent, and interesting education.

Leo is informed at the registrar's desk that there are certain basic requirements. These, it seems, consist of composition, literature, and a few incidental hours in a foreign tongue. In his composition course he soon runs afoul of further study of grammar technique. His literature professor condemns lower education for Leo's lack of development of the proper appreciation of poetry. Leo is amazed that any language can have as perverted a word order as German. If Leo is mentally sound enough to avoid schizophrenia, mayhem, and open warfare against professors during this trying period of disillusionment, he may go on to become a normal student. Otherwise, he will add to the congestion at the local mental hospital. Assuming that he maintains his stability, we see Leo pursuing his education through redundant, ambiguous texts, through classes directed by professors who are warped with manias for exasperating accuracy, and through quizzes, tests, and final examinations in which appear questions the answers to which no sane person would bother to know. Four years of the prime of Leo's life are recorded, day by day, on classroom rosters; then one day education personified appears, draped in somber black, topped with a mortarboard, and hands Leo his degree.

Here from the threshold of the educational cocoon steps civilization's completed product. Here is the model of well-

rounded adulthood. Here is evolution in its highest form. Here is modern man. True, more than one-third of his life span is gone. True also is the fact that Leo was biologically mature some eight to ten years ago, at which time, according to nature, he had completed his apprenticeship in living. True, he now feels that time is growing short and he must drive himself to the apex of a career in a mad dash for fleeting glory; but then, there was no other way. A complex society with complex languages demanded that the development of the mind be given a longer period than nature's development of the body. So crude a thing as nature can be no authority in marking off the schedule of a person's life except at both ends.

Statistically speaking, Leo's battle with languages has now consumed about 26,840 hours of his time plus an incomputable outlay of money for books, fees, tuition, pencils, pens, appropriate clothing, and myriads of miscellaneous items.

Civilization, however, has been satiated. The end product of the educational grind has been realized. Here is a mass of protoplasm of animal origin which has been trained to think in terms of language. It communicates with other masses of protoplasm through language. It loves through language. It hates through language. It praises God by means of language. Languages furnish it with colorful profanity. The power of words has, indeed, placed Leo in a higher order. He enjoys automatic superiority to the physically mute; he is able to convert his friends into foes by correcting flaws in their grammar; he is capable of sarcasm, satire, hypocrisy, and egotism; and he has the power to create endless boredom for others.

The struggle to gain mastery over language has been demonstrated as long, arduous, nerve-wracking, and expensive. The resulting qualities have been enumerated in part. In view of these facts, the question of whether or not to continue the use of language practically answers itself. Obviously, the value of the product is vastly inferior to the price. Therefore, let us signify the demise of language by the same word with which it was begun. We shall, at the sound of the gong, toss our dictionaries over our left shoulders and say in unison, "Ugh."

Night Guard at a Mausoleum

Stanley Levine

The ping of God re-echoes on an unpaved road;

The crude tin roof accepts its rival waves;

The spirit of death awakens its challenged song.

In the quaint hut amidst its unborn graves

I harken to the call of life

And lift a rodent from its mother's nest.